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Debunking Myths Around Video Games

By Aditi Agarwal, and Dr. Raffael Boccamazzo · April 24th, 2023 · Expert Content, Video Games

Whether you prefer action-packed video games like *Call of Duty* or games to unwind after a busy day like *Candy Crush* there is something for everyone. Today, over 215 million Americans – and billions more around the world – of all ages play video games daily for a variety of reasons, whether it's to unwind, for comfort, for connection, or just for fun. However, video games have had a bad reputation within the media for almost half a century. From being blamed for school shootings to controversial terms such as "video game addiction" and "gaming disorder," there are several misconceptions about video games and their effects. This article focuses on clearing up three prevalent myths that surround video games to give readers a more accurate understanding of gaming.

Myth#1: Video Games Cause Players to be More Violent in Real Life

Video games have frequently been blamed as a reason behind school shootings and other violent crime. The reality is that violent video games do not lead to long-term, violent behavior in real life, and both research and common sense statistics show us this.

Studies which claim that video games cause violence frequently have limits in their methodology like only monitoring individuals directly after playing instead of assessing violent behaviors over a longer time period. Short-term behavior, in these cases, may be due to lingering adrenaline, as opposed to long-term changes. Studies also frequently use lab-analogues of "violent" behavior (e.g, will participants give more hot sauce to someone) instead of looking at real-world, long-term, violent behavior patterns. One study that did look at more long-term effects separated participants into two groups and – over a two-month period – had one play *Grand Theft Auto V* (a violent game) and the second group play *the Sims* (a non-violent game). After two months, both groups had similar "violent" tendencies, which were close to none. Neither group exhibited any significantly different emotional or behavioral changes long-term.

Millions of people in the US play violent video games, yet an extremely small fraction of these people exhibit ongoing, violent behavior. Given how prevalent video game playing is, saying that violent video games cause shootings is equivalent to saying that something like drinking water causes shootings

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since every shooter also drinks water. Beyond that, violent crime in the United States has decreased by almost 50% in the last 30 years when the consumption of video games has only skyrocketed during this time.

Instead of blaming video games for shootings, it is important to examine and research the true causes of violent behavior and work to eradicate those. Scapegoating one easily disprovable cause stops us from doing that.

Myth#2: All Video Games are Addictive

In the media, video games have frequently been sensationalized as "addictive" and compared to hard drugs with terms like "digital heroin," since some people play them to the point that it negatively impacts their lives. While some people do have problems with playing video games too much, considerable disagreement exists in the research community over whether this behavior is due to addiction – in the strictest sense of the term – or if there are other underlying factors as the root cause. After all, people can engage in highly focused or repetitive patterns of behavior for many reasons (e.g., obsessive compulsive disorder, ADHD, autism, and posttraumatic stress disorder) which have nothing to do with addiction, even if the behaviors outwardly look the same.

The neurotransmitter dopamine is frequently argued as a reason for video games as "addictive" because playing them releases dopamine, as does using illicit drugs. Dopamine is a neurochemical that relates to learning and motivation, especially during pleasurable experiences. It tells us, "Hey! We should do that again!" Even though video games do release dopamine, the reality is that all fun things release dopamine – eating your favorite food, watching a movie, and hanging out with friends. The dopamine released while playing video games is more on-par with eating pizza than it is to any hard drugs. While video games increase dopamine levels by about 75% above normal, cocaine increases dopamine levels by 350%, amphetamine by 900%, and methamphetamine by 1200%! These are hardly comparable levels.

Returning to an earlier point, many researchers still do not agree on what the underlying causes of problematic video game engagement are, and they caution against widely assuming repetitive behaviors when it comes to video games are "addiction." When the World Health Organization (WHO) proposed including "gaming disorder" in the eleventh edition of the International Classification of Diseases manual, over two dozen international researchers opposed it and argued:

- The proposed symptom criteria are too reliant on addiction-based causes without widespread, scientific consensus.
- The widespread stigma regarding video game activities, when combined with the broad symptom criteria, may result in harmful overdiagnosis, especially in minors.
- Formalizing a diagnosis can force future research to focus on confirming the diagnosis, as opposed to establishing underlying causes.

- Premature inclusion of a formal diagnosis without scientific consensus further contributes to the stigma of video game activities.

It is important to note that these researchers recognized that some people do have problems with playing video games too much. What they warn us against, however, is oversimplifying the cause when we do not fully understand it or even if there are multiple causes, depending on the person. To put it another way, it would be like assuming everyone who sneezes and coughs has influenza, and then we start treating the influenza before stopping to figure out if they are sneezing and coughing because of something like allergies – same outward appearance, but a different cause. This stops us from getting to the real root of things and effectively helping people.

Myth#3: All Video Games are Predatory in their Design

Many people also hold the belief that all video games are predatory by design. This idea does not hold true for all video games because video games are as varied in their design as any other medium. Predatory design is when games "disguise or withhold the long-term cost of the activity until players are already financially and psychologically committed," and not all games do that.

While all media needs to generate revenue to be sustainable, *how* they do that is important. Predatory design elements include things like false advertising, mismatching players with overly powerful enemies (or other players), and several other strategies that often require players to essentially pay to win. The tricky part is that any game can include these predatory elements, but not all games do, even free-to-play games.

Think of any video game where you buy a copy of the game, and then just play it. The developer and publisher have your money upfront. They do not generally need to use predatory design mechanics. They only need to make the game fun so you recommend it to others so they buy it too! On the flip side are free-to-play games with no upfront cost. They have to generate revenue through either in-game advertisements or in-game transactions, and some argue that there are more opportunities for financial exploitation in free-to-play games.

Like all forms of media, there are pros and cons to video games, and these are often nuanced. The problem with widespread myths rooted more in moral panic than science is that they skip over nuance and make everything black-and-white, good-or-bad, all-or-nothing. Debunking some of these three myths allows for a better understanding of what gaming really is and for us to address the challenges more fully, while simultaneously embracing the benefits. Ultimately, it is up to the player or their guardians to be informed on these nuances and make conscientious decisions, just like any other form of media.

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Aditi Agarwal (she/her) is a high school senior who is passionate about advocating for mental health. For her capstone project she worked with the Take This team to learn about the actualities behind video games and gaming. Additionally, in her free time she also enjoys baking all sorts of desserts, playing video games with her brother, and reading a good book! You can reach out to with questions or connect with her via LinkedIn.

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Take This is a mental health nonprofit decreasing stigma and increasing support for mental health in games.

We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit mental health organization providing comprehensive resources and support that is tailored for the unique needs of the game development community and embraces the diverse cultures and issues of the game community. We combine clinical best practice with a love of all things gamer, providing a safe, accepting space for gamers and developers. We work in a spirit of partnership with other organizations addressing these issues among game enthusiasts, streamers, and creators.

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